The British Film Resource

# The Films of David Lynch: 50 Percent Sound

The Films of David Lynch

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## Chapter 1

*Sound is almost like a drug. It's so pure that when it goes in you ears, it instantly does something to you. And you can tell if that's working for you.*

(Lynch in www.geocities)

Visualise post-Industrial England London. The air is thick with pollution, the clanking and banging of mechanical noise pervades the atmosphere. The streets are filthy with grime and soot. This is the setting of David Lynch's second major film project, *The Elephant Man* (1980). The depiction of 19th century London served two purposes in the film; to portray the dark and harsh reality of that period but more importantly to convey Lynch's aesthetic of industry and mechanisation, a recurring factor throughout all of his films .

To begin I would like to define the difference between noise and sound. It can be argued that sound and noise is the same thing, but in the context that I am going to use them I wish to establish noise as being a sound such as a bang, drip or crash. Sound on the other hand is the umbrella-like term that covers music, noise and dialogue in much the same way that image covers painting, film or photograph. These definitions will allow one to fully understand the terms in the context that I have used them in this paper.

Image and sound are at odds throughout *The Elephant Man*, but paradoxically work together in order to create a rich composition, where one without the other would render certain key aspects of the film ineffective. Between image and sound, the critic Kenneth C. Kaleta argues that sound overshadows and infiltrates every aspect of the film, and that it is noise that carries the film's theme; noises control the film's mood. (Kaleta, 1993)

Sounds are not only incorporated into the web of the film in order to create the reality of that era, but they are over-emphasised so that the noise, not the musical score, creates a soundtrack, although both are used to great effect in this film. Lynch has even been quoted as saying, "I really like the idea of sound effects being used as music." (Hughes, 2001, p.41) With this statement in mind consider Alfred Hitchcock's employment of German avant-garde composers Oskar Sala and Remi Gassman to supply the sound effects of birds in his classic *The Birds* (1963). Gassman and Sala created the sound effects on an instrument known as the Trautonium, a prototype synthesizer of sorts that created electronic noises, which could mimic the sounds of birds. Whether Lynch was aware of this, or even influenced by this I am uncertain, but it is an interesting analogy that reflects Lynch's notion of using sound effects as a sort of musical soundtrack.

To elaborate further I would argue that not only does Lynch's use of noises create a musical score, but it also forms an audio narrative for the viewer, a narrative that tells us the story from a different viewpoint. This narrative is made up of three key elements: background noise, silence and dialogue. These elements all help to shape the sonic story in Lynch's films, but at the same time work independently of one another in order to cement the audio and visual structure of Lynch's films. Like the complex characters we see in his films, the key elements of the audio narrative give

Lynch's stories an added depth; they conjure up explanations as well as creating more mysteries.

In *The Elephant Man*, the period setting of the film gave Lynch ample opportunity for him to explore and appropriate the sounds he could adopt in order to create atmosphere, mood and narrative. Kenneth Kaleta writes, "The noises convey London's East End: the cheap chatter of a pub, the dripping of draining water, the blast of factory flames, the lighting of gas lamps in hospital wards." (Kaleta, 1993, p.62) Kaleta's description serves to highlight how the visual imagery goes hand-in-hand with the sounds that compliment them. Without the sounds, the imagery would be of little use in creating the atmosphere; bereft of sound the image alone would explain hardly anything.

In the majority of the hospital scenes throughout *The Elephant Man*, gas lamps are heard hissing. In fact the constant muted roar of gas lamps almost becomes the primary element in those scenes, and the viewer is not actually made aware of the source of this noise in the hospital scenes until later in the film. This source of noise is highlighted in a scene where the lamps are dimmed for the evening and one is able to watch as the lamps dim as well as listen to the muted roar become a hiss. By integrating the audio and visual elements of the gas lamps, Lynch is allowed to explain what the viewer is watching and hearing. But at the same time he manages to retain an abstract and ironic quality, in that one may have been unsure of the noise before the dimming of the lamps, but now that the source of light has almost gone we are able to identify the sound. Kenneth Kaleta supports this notion when he argues that, "The film appeals to the aural sense by supporting the story with auditory effects." (ibid, p.63) In effect Lynch has, through early audio detachment and disassociation, produced an abstract narrative that confronts the unknowing viewer and coerces them into a story that becomes clearer later, when a visual clue is offered. This in itself could be seen as a sonic metaphor for the early mysteriousness of John Merrick who, like the gas lamps' hissing noise, is not revealed until a good deal of time has passed on-screen.

Unlike *The Elephant Man* where Lynch appropriated the sounds of on-screen imagery to support the story, his debut film *Eraserhead* (1977) contained background noise that was not supported by visual images. Instead Lynch created a dense texture of noise that conveyed an industrial-like soundscape and foreboding presence of distorted machinery. The visual narrative of the film is highly unusual and one cannot help but feel puzzled by apparently random happenings that do not appear to connect scenes together. But any lack of visual narrative is more than made up for by audio narrative according to Michel Chion who argues, "Sound has a precise function, propelling us through the film, giving us the sense of being inside it, wrapped within its time span." (Chion, 1995 p.44) With this in mind one feels that the audio content of the film relays an abstract narrative of sorts, always present and creating an atmosphere of tension, isolation and relief, but never visually identifiable. This can leave the audience disorientated and alienated, an emotion often identified with Henry Spencer, the main character of the film.

Another interesting point is that throughout the film there are no natural sounds of birds, animals or the wind. Instead the viewer is subjected to a phenomenon called 'room tone', which Lynch describes as the sound of silence that you hear in between sentences and spoken words (Rodley, 1997). This description of room tone certainly supports my argument that the film's sound creates tension and isolation, in that the silence between spoken

words is a silence often associated with discomfort and isolation, but it is also a silence that allows one to ponder and think, or even dream. And *Eraserhead* is often thought to be a depiction of a dream or nightmare, a harsh nightmare, taking place in the mind of Henry. This dream theory allows one to gain some understanding of the importance of an audio narrative, for if the film is the depiction of a dream then the imagery is going to be disjointed and almost nonsensical. Kenneth Kaleta argues that, "There is no sense of surety in narrative conventions." (Kaleta, 1993, p.22) With no surety of what is happening visually, a sonic narrative enables the viewer to be propelled through the film.

*Eraserhead* defined Lynch as an auteur and displayed an ability to forge a relationship between audio and visual content in a film that had not been witnessed before. In *The Elephant Man* this skill was sharpened and used in a less fantastical context, but nevertheless to great effect. It is Lynch's keen eye and ear for audio-visual bonds that help to create the 'Lynchian' technique. But not everyone would agree with the techniques Lynch has adopted, in particular his reliance on an audio-visual bond. The French director Robert Bresson stated, "Image and sound must not support each other, but must work each in turn through a sort of relay." (Bresson in www.filmsound...bresson) I would argue that this statement cannot be applied directly to Lynch's works per se because I feel that the image and sound in his films do support each other, and with good reason, particularly when one observes another of the key elements of the audio narrative: silence. On one level the image and sound do perform in a relay of sorts, for example in scenes of silence where the emphasis is on the image. But on the other hand by observing the silence in the scene, this is in fact a representation of sound itself, therefore the absence of sound supports the image.

The theorist Bela Balazs tells us, "The presentation of silence is one of the most specific dramatic effects of the sound film. No other art can reproduce silence, neither painting nor sculpture, neither literature nor the silent film could do so." (Balazs in www.lavender...theory-of-film) With this theory in mind it is safe to say that Lynch's use of silence in films is treated the same way as his use of sound, such as 'room tone'. Interestingly one can link this notion of silence to the infamous 4' 33" (1952) composition by avant-garde composer John Cage. The writer and critic Richard Kostelanetz writes of the piece, "What is written as a silent passage is actually filled with extraneous sound (noise), because pure silence is physically impossible; therefore, every piece of music we hear contains sound both intentional and non-intentional." (Kostelanetz, 1970, p.108) Cage made the audience aware of the sound that surrounds people in a concert hall or place of performance when a passage of silence is performed. It now appears that Lynch has taken this notion one stage further and applied it to film, using 'silence' to accentuate the quiet, background noises that people are used to and do not normally notice.

In Lynch's penultimate film *The Straight Story* (1999), silence is employed regularly to convey isolation, but also to create sonic discomfort in order to reflect the fact that the main character, Alvin Straight, has not spoken to his brother for many years. The theorist and sound designer Philip Brophy comments on this when he writes, "There are many moments in the film where one hears absolutely nothing. The abject silence of The Straight Story echoes that loss of proximity engineered by old age: literally, we are removed from the film; not merely from a certain narrational moment, but from the realm of narration. We are left sitting in the cinema in total isolation." (Brophy in www.media-arts...StraightStory) Through this isolation the viewer is able to empathise with the isolation felt by Alvin in the film; the silence is

symbolic of his solo journey to meet his brother and also his lifelong journey, which is nearing its end, death being the ultimate silence.

In the opening shots of the film, a camera pans over houses, then lowers to an open window, but from such an angle that we are unable to view inside the house. The silence is then broken by a noise of something being struck or dropped, an eerie reverb sound is heard and then the next scene come in. We learn later that the noise was the sound of Alvin falling and that he was unable to move from the spot he landed. By using silence for the scene Lynch was able to create intrigue in the viewer, a sense of not knowing what was happening. It is interesting that Alvin didn't cry for help, perhaps he was knocked out, but more likely is that he had resigned himself to being alone and without help, thus echoed by the silence. Philip Brophy calls this,"The 'psycho-acoustic realm of loneliness', a factor enveloped by the onset of old age." (ibid.). Using the absence of silence in relation to on-screen imagery, Lynch is able to create a narration that captures the aging process as well as telling a story.

The third element of audio narration that Lynch has explored and often used to wonderful abstract effect is through dialogue. In his films Lynch has experimented and subverted dialogue in order to create a sonic dimension that stretches the viewer's senses further. In the richly woven audio tapestry of Lynch's films a voice can be projected to the forefront of the scene leaving the observer in no doubt as to how significant or relevant that piece of dialogue is. Dialogue lends itself heavily to the narration of Lynch's films and a useful example of this is seen in Lynch's third major film project *Dune* (1984), based on the epic science fiction novel of the same name by Frank Herbert. Throughout the film voiceovers are used to convey the thoughts of characters (see clip 4), which goes some way in helping the viewer to understand the role of the character, but more importantly lends an audio dimension that draws the viewer into various intricate sub-plots that are taking place. The writer John Alexander comments, "Just as Herbert reveals the inner thoughts of many characters, Lynch uses this essentially literary device for the same reason, to externalise the inner thoughts of 'dramatis personae'. Even the Baron Harkonnen reveals his bloody intent with the aid of inner monologues in David Lynch's *Dune*." (Alexander, 1993, p.73) One could argue that by using this technique Lynch has forsaken his usual audio-visual approach in order to allow the film to be a commercially suitable length. But counter to that perhaps Lynch has adopted the voiceover technique as a means of strengthening the characters and emphasising the role of dialogue in the overall story. Critic Bill Kte'pi observed that some lines appeared to be written for their internal rhythm as much as for their contextual use (www.ktepi).

In *The Elephant Man* the troubled wheezing of John Merrick throughout the film serves as a sort of narrative. The critic Michel Chion observed that Merrick's asthmatic, laboured breathing was a continuum between his distressed bodily machinery and the film's translation of industry (Chion, 1995). It is also interesting to note the development of Merrick's voice throughout the film. When the audience first hears Merrick he is barely audible and his speech is almost indecipherable; this is probably due to his ill treatment at the hands of his tormentor, Bytes. But after he is taken into care and treated with respect his whole demeanour and voice in particular changes. He still struggles with his breathing, but his speech is more confident; he talks with a dignified air and reads poetry. The physical transformation that has taken place around Merrick alters his persona and this in turn lends an element of narration to the dialogue, in that Merrick's dialogue increases considerably in length

and clarity, allowing him to fulfil the role of narrator from his perspective.

The character of John Merrick had a voice that was guttural and indecipherable due to his physical ailments, but in his other films Lynch has purposefully altered and transmogrified characters' voices in order to create wild and interesting personas. The creation of these characters enables Lynch to subvert the narrative and be playful with the audience's perception of what is taking place on screen. A useful argument to support the use of abstract or strange dialogue in Lynch's films is highlighted when the academic Siegfried Kracauer states, "Emphasis on voices as sounds may also serve to open up the material regions of the speech world for their own sake." (Kracauer in www.lavender...dialogue-and-sound)

The best example of Lynch's technique of voice transmogrification is seen in Twin Peaks (1990), in a place called the Red Room, where two characters, The Man from Another Place and a Laura Palmer look-alike speak what appears to be backwards . The scene itself is set within a dream of FBI Agent Cooper, but where Lynch used an audio narrative to carry through the visual absurdity of *Eraserhead*, in *Twin Peaks* Lynch has subverted the audio narrative too. Agent Cooper is the only character in the Red Room scene that speaks normally, an anchor of normality in the sea of surreal. The scene was instrumental in shrouding the series in mystery, but ironically it was also full of clues to help remove the veil of mystery. By using surreal audio and visual elements Lynch has created the old notion that one cannot see the forest for the trees, in that the audience is confused by the images and audio content of the on-screen happenings. It is almost as if a narrative has been dispensed with and we have entered a weird non-linear world. What in fact Lynch has done is set up a parallel narrative or sub-plot that deals with issues that are integral to the overall story, but because they are set in a dream the viewer is left with no immediate comprehension of the narrative's relevance. Eventually a narrative comes through when Agent Cooper solves the riddles of the Red Room, and in retrospect one is able to come to an understanding of the role of narrative in the dialogue of the Red Room scene. Kenneth Kaleta strengthens this argument when he writes, "Following the patterning of images that seek emotional response rather than narrative sense, Lynch also operates in his sound network." (Kaleta, 1993, p.137)

By observing the three key elements of audio narrative (background noise, silence and dialogue) in Lynch's films one is able to witness the highly effective and often complex relationship between the sound and image that confronts the audience. This is a relationship full of peaks and troughs, but one that always maintains a unique flow allowing the viewer to be pulled along whether visually or sonically into the far-flung reaches and personal universe of David Lynch's often abstract mind.

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